PH 114B: Topics in Ethics—Technology Ethics

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Office Hours: Mon./Wed. 2:30 PM-3:30 PM (Rabb 311)

Course Dates: Aug. 25 – Dec. 19, 2022
Course Location: Olin-Sang 116
Course Time: Mon./Wed. 4:05 PM – 5:25 PM

Course Description

From TikTok to Meta, and from CRISPR to digital gamification, Extended Reality, and the struggle against climate change, dramatic advances in technology are shaping our world and our lives like never before. This course investigates the moral, social, and political implications of these and other new technologies. How should we understand privacy and surveillance in the age of metadata? Will emerging biotechnologies and life-tracking metrics allow us to re-engineer humanity? Should we edit our genes or those of our children to extend human lives and enhance human abilities? Can geoengineering resolve the climate crisis? How will AI and robotics change the work world? Can machines be "conscious" and what would it mean if they can? Will AI help us reduce bias and combat bigotry, or make things worse? What does the explosion of social media mean for human agency? How can we live an act in meaningful ways in a world increasingly dominated by technological and capital forces?

This course will explore how technology and our attitudes towards it are transforming who we are, what we do, how we make friends, care for our health, and conduct our social and political lives. In doing so, we will also investigate fundamental philosophical and ethical questions about agency, integrity, virtue, "the good," and what it means to be human in an uncertain and shifting world.

Course Outline

This course is designed to introduce you to the topic of Technology Ethics, or "Tech Ethics." 'Tech Ethics' refers to both a dedicated field of academic philosophical research that encompasses a broad array of questions and dilemmas engendered by the development of modern technologies, and to the ethical elements of the even broader social and political conversation that has arisen around emerging technologies. Consequently, for the bulk of the semester, we will alternate between investigating contemporary ethical dilemmas through concrete real-world case studies and reading recent academic articles and papers to help clarify and the ethical and philosophical issues involved in those cases.

However, before we can directly engage with real-world technologies and dilemmas, we will first need to lay some groundwork in **Unit 1, "Philosophy, Ethics, and Technology"** by discussing a) the "ontology of technology," (what *is* technology) b) some of the basic principles of ethical theory, and c) how we might conceptualize the "relationship between" technology and its human creators and users. The picture that will emerge over the course of the first unit (and the semester as whole) is that technology and humanity are and have always been so deeply interwoven that the two are both conceptually and experientially inextricable.

Human "nature" is fundamentally technological, and technology is fundamentally human. Both constantly shape and modify each other.

After these preliminary investigations, we will dig deeper into two sets of techno-ethical questions and investigate series of contemporary issues. In **Unit 2 "Technology & the World,"** we will ask the question, "How does technology (re)shape our world and our relationship to it?" Topics will include Geo Engineering and Environmental Justice; VR/XR/AR and the Metaverse; Artificial Intelligence and Algorithmic Justice; Robots, Labor, and War; and Metrics, Data, and Gamification.

In **Unit 3, "Technology & Humanity,"** we will ask "How does technology (re)shape who we are and how we relate to ourselves and to others?" In this unit we will discuss both Digital and Biological "Transhumanism;" Social Media, Privacy, and Surveillance; Deep Fakes; Augmentation Technologies (both mechanical and biological); and the general state of our techno-social world.

Along the way, we will work to develop standards of good argumentation and dialogue, practice careful reading, and try our hands at philosophical writing. Our goal is to develop a small community of curious and supportive minds who can help each other grow as learners, writers, and thinkers. In leaving this class, you should feel better prepared to engage with your peers about some of the most difficult questions, not just of our time, but of all times.

In addition to the assigned readings, your learning will be scaffolded by a series of short exercises and assignments designed to help you develop careful reading skills, ask powerful questions, and practice moral and philosophical reasoning. These exercises will be assigned on a roughly weekly basis. Starting in unit two, you will also be asked at to "take point" for one of our discussions this semester, along with a peer. The two of you will be responsible for leading your classmates through a guided discussion on the topic of the week, which may involve some additional reading and preparation. Finally, your main assignment for the semester will be to develop a research project of your own on one of the topics of the class. Starting about a third of the way through the semester, you will be asked to submit a series of preparatory documents (including an annotated bibliography and a research proposal) in preparation to either write a term paper or give an in-class presentation. These projects may be collaborative, though the final product will be your responsibility. I am also open to more creative/experimental research projects, but please reach out to me early in the process if you would like to try something a bit different. Depending on time constraints, we may compile our work into an online class journal (you can see examples of journals from previous classes here: www.techandethics.com)

This class is only an introduction. Every topic we touch on in this course is the subject of its own dedicated field of inquiry with an expansive existing literature! It is my hope that this class will be a doorway for further and deeper thinking for all of you.

Course Objectives

You will develop your abilities to:

- Engage competently with difficult ethical questions prompted by emerging technologies
- Craft responsible, considered, and well-structured arguments
- Express yourself orally and converse thoughtfully about complex ideas
- Gain competency in the general landscape of academic tech ethics, broadly construed
- Grow as a thinker, learner, reader, and communicator
- Develop a research interest in one or more area of Tech Ethics

Schedule of Topics

Please note that this schedule is liable to change depending on student interest and time constraints.

Unit 1: Philosophy, Ethics, & Technology
      Week 1: Greetings, Welcome, & Preliminary Investigations
      Week 2: What *is* Technology?
      Week 3: Technology & Ethics, Part I (Virtue, Duty, & Utility)
      Week 4: Technology & Ethics, Part II (Justice, Mediation, & the "Technological Attitude")

Unit 2: Technology & the World
      Week 5: Environmental Ethics, Geoengineering & the "Vulnerable World Hypothesis"
      Week 6: VR / XR /AR (Welcome to the Metaverse)
      Week 7: Artificial Intelligence & Algorithmic Justice
      Week 8: Robots, Labor, & War
      Week 9: Metrics, Data, and Gamification

Unit 3: Technology & Humanity
      Week 10: Social Media, Privacy, & Choice, Part I (Surveillance Capital & Behavior)
      Week 11: Social Media, Privacy, & Choice, Part II (Deep Fakes)
      Week 12: Augmentation, Part I (Mechanical Augmentation)
      Week 13: Augmentation, Part II (CRISPR & Genetic Engineering)
      Week 14: Transhumanism
      Week 15: Virtue & Justice in a Changing World

Course Handbook

Instructional Format, Course Pedagogy, and Approach to Learning

This course will be offered in a mixed seminar/discussion format. While I will occasionally lecture, most of the content and value of the course will come from classroom roundtable discussions, group activities, and research projects. I firmly believe that learning, especially philosophical learning involves a strong dialectical component.

Consequently, there will be a strong emphasis on communitarian approaches to thinking and learning, significant outside reading requirements, and the (well founded) assumption that we all have something important and interesting to bring to the conversation. We learn from each other, not in isolation, and so we will together endeavor to cultivate a classroom ethic of respect and community.

Books and Other Course Materials

All course materials will be available through the class Latte and/or Perusall sites. I encourage you to take active notes on your readings either by printing them or using an e-reader with annotation functions. We will occasionally use Perusall to share comments.

You should refer to the syllabus, which will be updated periodically, for the schedule of readings.

Additional Resources: Finding reliable information about philosophy online can be tricky. I highly recommend the following sites:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu/
The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://www.iep.utm.edu/

Courseware

Our class has a Blackboard site that contains the syllabus, assignments, and other course-related materials. You can log in to our Blackboard page at: http://learn.bu.edu/ All additional coursework will be posted on blackboard.

Assignments and Grading Criteria

To make the most out of this class for you and your classmates, you will do a good deal of reading and writing, and you will engage in a variety of class activities. Specific course requirements are to:

- Regularly attend and participate in classroom discussions and activities
- "Take Point" for one discussion this semester with a peer on the topic of your choosing.
- Participate Reading Check-ins, Discussion Questions, Moral Dilemmas, and Perusall annotations (roughly 1-2 per week).
- Complete a final project (either a term paper or presentation), including a research proposal as a midterm. I am open to creative final proposals as well.

Grading and Evaluation

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Attendance and Participation	10%
Weekly Exercises/Assignments	30%
Midterm Research Proposal	25%
Final Project	40%

Participation and Attendance

Since this course is highly discussion based, your regular attendance and active participation are essential both to your own learning and to that of your classmates. You will be allowed excused three absences, no questions asked, however, apart from emergencies, you must inform me of your intended absence BEFORE you miss class. If you don't notify me in advance, your absence will count as unexcused, and will incur a penalty in your participation grade.

In order to participate appropriately, you will be expected to prepare for class by reading all of the assigned texts and thinking critically about their content. Participation means regular verbal engagement with the course material. For most of you, this will mean paying attention in class and contributing to the conversation on a regular basis.

I know speaking in class can be a hurdle for some students, and I want everyone to be comfortable in their learning, but it is important that you try to develop public speaking skills as well as you are able. You may supplement class participation with office visits. Attendance and participation are worth 10% of your grade.

Office Hours

I will be available in my office at the times listed at the top of this syllabus. Please reach out to me if you would like to schedule a meeting outside of my normal office hours, or would like to meet by zoom

Submitting Assignments and Exercises

Assignments will be submitted and returned via Latte unless otherwise noted. The submission time is at the BEGINNING of the class period on the day that the assignment is due.

Late and Missed Assignments

Unless you make other arrangements with me in advance, graded assignments will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each day they are late. Please note too that we will regularly work with our exercises in class. If you are habitually late with your assignments, you will be unable to participate fully in the class.

Technology Policy

Computers, tablets, and similar devices will be generally permitted in this class. There will be a "no tolerance" policy for anyone who abuses this privilege. If you are caught misusing technology in this class (checking social media, for example), you will no longer be able to use your device at all in the classroom, which will severely hinder your learning.

Academic Integrity

Cases of plagiarism will be handled in accordance with the disciplinary procedures described in Brandeis' Academic Integrity Code, which I encourage you to read here: https://www.brandeis.edu/student-rights-community-standards/academic-integrity/index.html

Chosen Name and Gender Pronouns

My goal is help create an inclusive learning community that supports students of all gender expressions and identities. While class rosters are provided to instructors with students' legal names, please let me know if you would like to be addressed by a different name than that listed in your academic profile.   You are also invited to tell me early in the semester which set of pronouns (they/their/theirs, she/her/hers, he/him/his, etc.) you feel best fits you. My pronouns are he/him/his. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Student Accessibility Support

I assume that all of us learn in different ways. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please talk to me as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for accommodations that will satisfy both your learning needs and the requirements of the course. Whether or not you have a documented accessibility need, Brandeis provides many support services that are available to all students. Their website is here: https://www.brandeis.edu/academic-services/accessibility/index.html

The Accessibility Support Office is responsible for assisting all students.   If you have a disability that changes your learning condition your learning (whether visible or invisible, physical, emotional, or mental), you are encouraged to register with this office. The Accessibility Support Office will work with you to determine appropriate accommodations for your courses, such as additional time on tests, staggered homework assignments, or note-taking assistance. This office will give you a letter outlining the accommodations you need that you can share with your teachers; specific information about your disability will remain private. If you have any questions about accommodation, or what constitutes a disability, I invite you to speak with me or to the Accessibility Support Office.

Student Mental and Emotional Health

I recognize that being a college student can be an extraordinarily difficult and transformational experience, even in the best of times. Unfortunately, even before the COVID crisis, many students around the world were suffering from increased mental and emotional stresses, a pronounced sense of isolation and loneliness, and increased levels of depression, anxiety, and other serious mental health concerns. This situation has only been made worse in the last several years by the pandemic.

While there are limits on what I can do to help, I want aid in your learning in anyway possible. Please reach out to me if you are struggling with course material, workload, or other internal or external pressures that are making it difficult to participate fully in this course. Communication is key—so long as you stay in touch with me, we can almost always work something out to help you thrive in this course and beyond.

You don't need to wait for a crisis to seek counseling. If you would like someone to talk to, please reach out to Brandeis Counseling Center here: https://www.brandeis.edu/counseling/ Therapy can be helpful for just about everyone! If you do find yourself or one of your peers in crisis, their emergency consultation number is 781-736-3730 and their crisis number is 781-736-3333.